

EROS site celebra

by Ralph Hillgren

Just a month ago, in Edison township west of Garretson, ground was broken for the \$6,000,000 Earth Resources Observation System center. An oldtime walking plow -- no mere spade as is customarily seen in such ceremonials -- was used to turn over the soil.

By coincidence, it was 100 years ago this month when five pioneers in that township plowed the same way and made homes for themselves. Other settlers followed, and within four years the area was fully settled.

Those pioneers sought homes and a livelihood for themselves and their families. The new pioneers have established a nerve center to gather information on resources which aims to help all mankind.

Our story is about the men and women of the 1870s.

The five pioneers first looked for land south, then east of Sioux Falls. Finally, along Slip Up creek northeast of here, they found just what they wanted. They filed on the land as homesteaders, and with a team which had brought them with a covered wagon, each broke up five acres to meet conditions of the homestead act. The covered wagon was home. They remained a month, but that fall returned to meet other requirements of the law, in that one must not be absent from his claim for more than six months at a time. Before leaving they had built a dugout for one of their number who intended to bring his family for permanent settlement that fall.

These five were Norwegian immigrants from southeastern Minnesota, near the Iowa line. In those areas there had been pioneering by fellow Scandinavians even 20 years earlier. With those areas now settled, newer arrivals turned their eyes westward for free land, the great American prize. It was free, indeed, but with such obstacles as blizzards, drought, grasshoppers, crude and simple living conditions, and toil such as

few would endure in these days of easy living.

Back in Minnesota, the adventures brought word to their relatives that land was here for the taking. Their story started a big migration the following spring, 1873.

In a caravan of 10 covered wagons setting out for the new country were 46 persons, of whom 10 were adults and the rest children or young men and women. Five wagons were drawn by horses, five by oxen. Also in the parade moving slowly across the prairies were 85 head of cattle, 30 sheep, and eight colts. To the young people fell the duty of herding and rounding up the livestock.

The trip to Sioux Falls took four weeks. Sleeping and cooking quarters were in the wagons and a large tent. Early in the trip, in the more wooded sections, the livestock tended to stray, but on the prairie moved along with the wagons, steadily but slowly, over the wagon road to the west.

The Little Sioux River, east of Worthington, was a half mile wide due to spring rains. Wagons were emptied and the contents taken across the water on a raft supplied by a settler. People and animals waded across, with women and children carried on the shoulders of the men. An entire day was spent in making the crossing and there was another day drying out and reassembling the travelers' personal effects.

When the weary group arrived at the site of one of the previous year's homesteaders, a widow who had made the trip with six children and three relatives broke down and cried as she saw the type of dwelling the homesteaders would call home. Her experience was

like that of numerous other pioneer women who found an emptiness in the endless prairie.

The hardy homeseekers remained together about a week while looking for claims and otherwise preparing for settlement. They continued to work together, however, in building sod shanties, breaking ground, and putting up hay. Utensils for farming had to be shared.

Like the New Englanders and New Yorkers who came to this area about the same time or earlier, those Norwegians and their descendants may rightfully be called the "first families" of Minnehaha county. Although the present family trees are long, and the descendants may be found in many states, names of the pioneers are perpetuated among residents today. They are the Berdahls, Hennings, Hermansons, and the Wangness and Loftness people. Coming to the area a few weeks later were the Hans Steffenson and Paul Evenson families. East of them were two other pioneers, Ivar and Ellef E. Ellefson.

The original five of 1872 included John E. Berdahl, who had migrated from Norway in 1856; two sons, Andrew and Erick; Lars Brandsvold; and Lasse Bothun, who had pioneered near Vermillion in 1861 as a freighter, returned to Minnesota for merchandising and farming, and then decided in 1872 to try pioneering again. Bothun served in the 1863 territorial Legislature, in the Minnesota state Legislature in 1871, and in both the territorial and state Legislatures after coming here in 1872.

Erick and Andrew Berdahl, then 24 and 22 respectively, served as guides for 1873 caravan, having travelled the route

ates century

both in the spring and fall of the previous year. Their father set out ahead of them for a little preliminary work in getting the group located on the raw lands northeast of here which had met their approval.

These two, born in Norway, were to carve out interesting careers, Erick as a legislator and justice of the peace, and Andrew in many different functions. During his time he was county assessor and sheriff, treasurer's clerk, delegate to the 1885 and 1889 constitutional conventions, school teacher, merchant, and farmer. He spent two years in physical work and finance in the building of Augustana college at Canton. He had attended the "college on wheels" when it was located at Marshall, Wis. As an immigrant boy in Iowa he had clerked in a store, taught school, and performed pioneer farm work, including that of rail splitting for log house construction. He died in Sioux Falls in 1940 at age 90.

Others of the "first families" also have interesting stories.

In his autobiography written late in life, Andrew Berdahl told how more immigrants came from the old Iowa and Minnesota location, how the first school was built with sod in 1874, and how by 1876 the area was well settled and "teeming with life and good cheer," although there was suffering during the grasshopper plagues of 1874 and 1877.

Erick Berdahl, also of the original five, is survived by a daughter, Mrs. John Brown, of Dell Rapids. He died in 1937 at age 89.

One of the eight children of Andrew Berdahl, original homesteader and co-pilot with

Erick of the 1873 caravan, is James O. Berdahl, who at age 91 still practises law in Sioux Falls. Another of his children was Mrs. Jennie Rolvaag, who died two years ago at Northfield, Minn. She was the widow of O. E. Rolvaag, author of "Giants in the Earth" and two other novels pertaining to pioneer life in this area. Rolvaag, a professor at Augustana college when it was located at Canton, later serving at St. Olaf college in Northfield, gained his material for the novels by association with these pioneers. A son, Karl Rolvaag, was a recent governor of Minnesota.

A grandson of Andrew, Dr. Arthur Berdahl, is scheduled to receive the Augustana Alumni Achievement Award at the annual alumni dinner May 27. He is professor emeritus of music at Fresno State College, Fresno, Calif. His father, John G. Berdahl, who died in 1941, was registrar at Augustana.

Andrew's biography gives family history back to 1750. As to more recent things, he told how in Sognafjord, Norway, his mother baked for 10 weeks in preparation for the trip to the New World and how his father borrowed \$120 to meet costs of the journey. It took three months to get to Iowa--eight weeks and two days on shipboard from Bergen to Montreal, Can., then up the St. Lawrence canal and Welland canal into the Great Lakes to Chicago, next by rail to Galena, Ill., and from there by river boat on the Mississippi to Lansing, Ia. The father worked for others as a farm laborer and rail splitter before getting his own land and a log house. The children went three miles to school on foot.

The Berdahls have held family reunions over a period of 40 years.